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Whitehead

A Charge to the Poets

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POETS.

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POETS.

By WILLIAM WHITEHEAD, Esq;

POET LAUREAT.

Quasi ex Cathedrâ loquitur.—

LONDON:

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A

CHARGE

TO THE

POETS.

FULL twenty years have roll'd, ye rhiming band,
Since firſt I dipp'd in ink my trembling hand,
For much it trembled, tho' th' obliging few,
Who judge with candour, prais'd the * ſketch I drew;
And Echo, anſwering from the public voice,
Indulg'd as genius, what I fear'd was choice.
At length, arriv'd at thoſe maturer years
So rarely rais'd by hope, or ſunk by fears,
I reſt in peace; or ſcribble if I pleaſe:
In point of wealth not affluent, but at eaſe;

* "The danger of writing Verſe." Firſt printed in the year 1741. to which this Poem may be conſidered as a ſequel.

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In

In point of what the world and you call fame,
(I judge but by conjecture) much the ſame.
But whether right or wrong I judge, to you
It matters not: the following fact is true.
From nobler names, and great in each degree,
The penſion'd Laurel has devolv'd to me.
To me, ye Bards; and, what you'll ſcarce conceive,
Or, at the beſt, unwillingly believe,
Howe'er unworthily I wear the crown,
Unaſk'd it came, and from a hand unknown.
Then, ſince my King, and Patron have thought fit
To place me on the throne of modern wit,
My grave advice, my brethren, hear at large;
As Biſhops to their Clergy give their charge,
Tho' many a Prieſt, who liſtens, might afford
Perhaps more ſolid counſel to my Lord.

To YOU, ye guardians of the ſacred fount,
Deans and Archdeacons of the double mount,

That thro' our realms inteſtine broils may ceaſe,
My firſt, and laſt advice is, "Keep the peace!"
What is't to you, that half the town admire
Falſe ſenſe, falſe ſtrength, falſe ſoftneſs, or falſe fire?
Through heav'n's void concave let the meteors blaze,
He hurts his own, who wounds another's bays.
What is't to you that numbers place your name
Firſt, fifth, or twentieth, in the liſts of fame?
Old Time will ſettle all your claims at once,
Record the Genius, and forget the Dunce.

It boots us much to know, obſervers ſay,
Of what materials Nature form'd our clay;
From what ſtrange beaſt Prometheus' plaſtic art
Purloin'd the particle which rules the heart.
If milky ſoftneſs, gliding through the veins,
Incline the Muſe to panegyric ſtrains,
Inſipid lays our kindeſt friends may lull,
Be very moral, yet be very dull.

If bile prevails, and temper dictates ſatire,
Our wit is ſpleen, our virtue is ill-nature;
With it's own malice arm'd we combat evil,
As zeal for God's ſake ſometimes plays the devil.
O mark it well! does Pride affect to reign
The ſolitary tyrant of the brain?
Or Vanity exert her quick'ning flame,
Stuck round with ears that liſten after fame?
O to theſe points let ſtrict regard be given,
Nor *"KNOW THYSELF" in vain deſcend from Heaven.
Do Critics teize you?---with a ſmile I ſpeak,
Nor would ſuppoſe my brethren were ſo weak.
'Tis on ourſelves and not our foes, or friends,
Our future fame, or infamy depends.
Let envy point, or malice wing the darts,
They only wound us in our mortal parts.
Beſides, 'tis much too late to go to ſchool,
Grown men will judge by Nature's nobleſt rule,
Admire

* E cœlo deſcendit, γνωθι σεαυτον. Juv.

Admire true beauties, and ſlight faults excuſe,
Not learn to dance from * Journals and Reviews.
If fools traduce you, and your works decry,
As many fools will rate your worth too high;
Then ballance the account, and fairly take
The cool report which men of judgment make.
In writing, as in life, he foils the foe,
Who, conſcious of his ſtrength, forgives the blow.
They court the inſult who but ſeem afraid:
And then, by anſwering, you promote the trade,
And give them, what their own weak claims deny,
A chance for future laughter, or a ſigh.

You, who as yet, unſullied by the Preſs,
Hang o'er your labours in their virgin dreſs;
And YOU, who late the public taſte have hit,
And ſtill enjoy the honey-moon of wit,

* This is not intended as a reflection on either the Journals or the Reviews. They are not the Maſters but the Scholars, the Grown Gentlemen, at whom the Author ſmiles; and who, he thinks, had much better not pretend to judge at all, than borrow opinions which never ſit eaſy upon them.

Attentive hear me: grace may ſtill abound,
Whoever preaches, if the doctrine's ſound.

If Nature prompts you, or if friends perſuade,
Why write; but ne'er purſue it as a trade.
And ſeldom publiſh: manuſcripts diſarm
The cenſor's frown, and boaſt an added charm,
Enhance their worth by ſeeming to retire,
For what but few can prate of, all admire.

Who trade in verſe, alas, as rarely find,
The public grateful, as the Muſes kind.
From conſtant feaſts like fated gueſts we ſteal,
And tir'd of tickling loſe all power to feel.
'Tis novelty we want; with that in view
We praiſe ſtale matter, ſo the Bard be new;
Or from known Bards with exſtacy receive
Each pert new whim they almoſt bluſh to give.

A life of writing, unleſs wond'rous ſhort,
No wit can brave, no genius can ſupport.

Some ſoberer province for your buſineſs chuſe,
Be that your helmet, and your plume the Muſe.
Through Fame's long rubric, down from Chaucer's time,
Few fortunes have been rais'd by lofty rhime.
And, when our toils ſucceſs no longer crowns,
What ſhelter find we from a world in frowns?
O'er each diſtreſs, which vice or folly brings,
Tho' Charity extend her healing wings,
No Maudlin Hoſpitals are yet aſſign'd
For ſlip-ſhod Muſes of the vagrant kind;
Where anthems might ſucceed to ſatires keen,
And hymns of penitence to ſongs obſcene.
What refuge then remains?---with gracious grin
Some practis'd Bookſeller invites you in.
Where luckleſs Bards, condemn'd to court the town,
(Not for their parents' vices, but their own!)
Write gay conundrums with an aching head,
Or earn by defamation daily bread,

Or friendleſs, ſhirtleſs, pennyleſs complain,
Not of the world's, but "Cælia's cold diſdain."

Lords of their workhouſe ſee the tyrants ſit
Brokers in books, and ſtock-jobbers in wit,
Beneath whoſe laſh, oblig'd to write or faſt,
Our confeſſors and martyrs breathe their laſt!

And can ye bear ſuch inſolence?---away,
For ſhame; plough, dig, turn pedlars, drive the dray;
With minds indignant each employment ſuits,
Our fleets want failors, and our troops recruits;
And many a dirty ſtreet, on Thames's ſide,
Is yet by ſtool and bruſh unoccupied.

Time was when Poets play'd the thorough game,
Swore, drank, and bluſter'd, and blaſphem'd for fame.
The firſt in brothels with their punk and Muſe;
Your toaſt, ye Bards? "Parnaſſus and the ſtews!"
Thank Heaven the times are chang'd; no Poet now
Need roar for Bacchus, or to Venus bow.

'Tis our own fault if Fielding's laſh *we* feel,
Or, like French wits, begin with the Baſtile.
Ev'n in thoſe days ſome few eſcap'd their fate,
By better judgment, or a longer date,
And rode, like buoys, triumphant o'er the tide.
Poor Otway in an ale-houſe dos'd, and died!
While happier Southern, tho' with ſpots of yore,
Like Plato's hovering ſpirits, cruſted o'er,
Liv'd every mortal vapour to remove,
And to our admiration join'd our love.
Light lie his funeral turf!---for you, who join
His decent manners to his art divine,
Would ye (whilſt, round you, toſs the proud and vain
Convuls'd with feeling, or with giving pain)
Indulge the Muſe in innocence and eaſe,
And tread the flowery path of life in peace?
Avoid all authors.---What! th' illuſtrious few,
Who ſhunning Fame have taught her to purſue

Fair

Fair Virtue's heralds?---yes, I ſay again,
Avoid all authors, 'till you've read the men.
Full many a peeviſh, envious, ſlandering elf,
Is, in his works, Benevolence itſelf.
For all mankind unknown, his boſom heaves,
He only injures thoſe with whom he lives.
Read then the Man: Does truth his actions guide,
Exempt from petulance, exempt from pride?
To ſocial duties does his heart attend,
As Son, as Father, Huſband, Brother, Friend?
Do thoſe who know him love him? if they do,
You've *my* permiſſion, you may love him too.
But chief avoid the boiſt'rous roaring ſparks,
The ſons of fire!---you'll know them by their marks.
Fond to be heard they always court a croud,
And, tho' 'tis borrow'd nonſenſe, talk it loud.
One epithet ſupplies their conſtant chime,
Damn'd bad, *damn'd* good, *damn'd* low, and *damn'd* ſublime!

But moſt in quick ſhort repartee they ſhine
Of local humour; or from plays purloin
Each quaint ſtale ſcrap which every ſubject hits,
'Till fools almoſt imagine, they are wits.
Hear them on Shakeſpear! there they foam, they rage!
Yet taſte not half the beauties of HIS page,
Nor ſee that Art, as well as Nature, ſtrove
To place HIM foremoſt in th' Aonian grove.
For there, there only, where the ſiſters meet,
HIS Genius triumphs, and the work's compleat.
Or would ye ſift more near theſe ſons of fire,
'Tis Garrick, and not Shakeſpear they admire.
Without his breath, inſpiring every thought,
They ne'er perhaps had known what Shakeſpear wrote;
Without his eager, his becoming zeal,
To teach them, tho' they ſcarce know why, to feel,
A crude unmeaning maſs had Johnſon been,
And a dead letter Shakeſpear's nobleſt ſcene.

O come the time, when diffidence again
Shall bind our youth in Nature's modeſt chain!
Born in a happier age, and happier clime,
Old Sophocles *had* merit, in his time;
And ſo, no doubt, howe'er *we* flout his plays,
Had poor Euripides, in former days.
Not like the moderns we confeſs; but yet
Some ſeeming faults we ſurely might forget,
Becauſe 'twould puzzle even the wiſe to ſhow
Whether thoſe faults were real faults, or no.
To all true merit give it's juſt applauſe,
The worſt have beauties, and the beſt have flaws.
Greek, French, Italian, Engliſh, great or ſmall,
I own *my* frailty, I admire them all.
There are, miſtaking prejudice for taſte,
Who on one ſpecies all their rapture waſte.
Tho', various as the flowers which paint the year,
In rainbow charms the changeful Nine appear,

The different beauties coyly they admit,
And to one ſtandard would confine our wit.
Some MANNER'D VERSE delights; while ſome can raiſe
To fairy FICTION their exſtatic gaze,
Admire PURE POETRY, and revel there
On ſightleſs forms, and pictures of the air!
Some hate all RHIME; ſome *ſeriouſly* deplore
That Milton wants that one enchantment more.
Tir'd with th' ambiguous tale, or antique phraſe,
O'er Spenſer's happieſt paintings, lovelieſt lays,
Some heedleſs paſs: while ſome with tranſport view
Each quaint old word, which ſcarce Eliza knew;
And, eager as the fancied knights, prepare
The lance, and combat in ideal war
Dragons of luſt, and giants of deſpair.

Why be it ſo; and what each thinks the teſt
Let each enjoy: but not condemn the reſt.

Readers there are of every claſs prepar'd,
Each village teems, each hamlet has its Bard
Who gives the tone, and all th' inferior fry,
Like the great vulgar here, will join the cry.
But be it mine with every Bard to glow,
And taſte his raptures genuine as they flow,
Through all the Muſe's wilds to rove along
From plaintive Elegy to Epic ſong;
And, if the ſenſe be juſt, the numbers clear,
And the true colouring of the work be there,
Again, ſubdued by Truth's ingenuous call,
I own *my* frailty, I admire them all.
Nor think I, with the mob, that Nature now
No longer warms the ſoil where laurels grow.
'Tis true Our Poets in repoſe delight,
And, wiſer than their fathers, ſeldom write.

Yet

Yet I, but I forbear for prudent ends,
Could name a liſt, and half of them *my* friends,
For whom poſterity it's wreaths ſhall twine,
And it's own Bards neglect, to honour mine.

Their Poets in their turn will grieve, and ſwear,
Perhaps with truth, no Patron lends an ear.
Complaints of times when merit wants reward.
Deſcend like ſimilies from Bard to Bard;
We copy our diſtreſs from Greece and Rome;
As in our Northern lays their flowrets bloom.
We feel their breezes, with their heats we burn,
And plead preſcription to rejoice or mourn.

All preſent times are bad: then caſt your eyes
Where fairy ſcenes of bliſs in proſpect riſe.
As fond enthuſiaſts o'er the weſtern main
With eager ken, prophetical in vain,

See the mixt multitudes from every land
Grow pure by blending, virtuous by command;
'Till, phœnix-like, a new bright world of gold
Springs from the dregs and refuſe of the old.

I'm no enthuſiaſt, yet with joy can trace
Some gleams of ſunſhine for the tuneful race.
If Monarchs liſten when the Muſes woo,
Attention wakes, and nations liſten too.
The Bard grows rapturous, who was dumb before,
And every freſh-plum'd eagle learns to ſoar!

Friend of the finer arts, when Ægypt ſaw
Her ſecond Ptolemy give Science law,
Each Genius waken'd from his dead repoſe,
The column ſwell'd, the pile majeſtic roſe,
Exact proportion borrow'd ſtrength from eaſe,
And uſe was taught by elegance to pleaſe.

Along

Along the breathing walls, as fancy flow'd,
The ſculpture ſoften'd, and the picture glow'd,
Heroes reviv'd in animated ſtone,
The groves grew vocal, and the * Pleiads ſhone!
Old Nilus rais'd his head, and wond'ring cried,
Long live the King! my Patron, and my Pride!
Secure of endleſs praiſe, behold, I bear
My grateful ſuffrage to my Sovereign's ear.
Tho' war ſhall rage, tho' Time ſhall level all,
Yon colours ſicken, and yon columns fall,
Tho' art's dear treaſures feed the waſting flame,
And the proud volume ſinks, an empty name,
Tho' Plenty may deſert this copious vale,
My ſtreams be ſcatter'd, or my fountain fail,

* The Seven Poets patroniſed by Ptolemy Philadelphus are uſually called by the name of that conſtellation.

Yet Ptolemy has liv'd: the world has known
A King of arts, a Patron on a throne.
Ev'n utmoſt Britain ſhall his name adore,
* " And Nile be ſung, when Nile ſhall flow no more."

One rule remains. Nor ſhun nor court the great,
Your trueſt center is that middle ſtate
From whence with eaſe th' obſerving eye may go
To all which ſoars above, or ſinks below.
'Tis yours all manners to have tried, or known,
T' adopt all virtues, yet retain your own:
To ſtem the tide, where thoughtleſs crowds are hurl'd,
The firm ſpectators of a buſtling world!

Thus arm'd, proceed: the breezes court your wing.
Go range all Helicon, taſte every ſpring;

* " And Boyn be ſung, when it has ceas'd to flow." Addiſon.

From

From varying nature cull th' innoxious ſpoil,
And, whilſt amuſement ſooths the generous toil,
Let puzzled Critics with judicious ſpite
Deſcant on what you can, or can not write.
True to yourſelves, not anxious for renown,
Nor court the world's applauſe, nor dread it's frown.
Guard your own breaſts, and be the bulwark there
To know no envy, and no malice fear.
At leaſt you'll find, thus Stoic-like prepar'd,
That Verſe and Virtue are their own reward.

THE END.

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